

# Queens of the Stone Age

## *...Like Clockwork*

Album Review by Brendan Wong



*Album Art, designed by artist **Boneface***

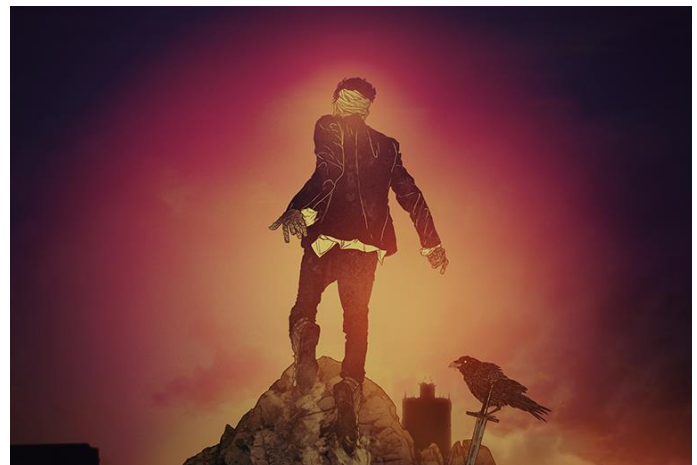
Although they have wandered far from the harder-edged stoner rock sound that they had when they formed in 1996, **Queens of the Stone Age** is definitely not lost. From California's Palm Desert, their unique dirty and dry (yet powerful) sound quickly earned them the label of being one of the biggest "desert rock" groups in the scene. Their sound, however, took a massive turn with the release of their sixth studio album *...Like Clockwork* on June 3rd, 2013. Fresh from the gritty retro blues of their previous record, *Era Vulgaris* (2007), frontman **Joshua Homme**'s brush with death, a heart attack during a medical surgery gone wrong, gives *...Like Clockwork* with a far darker and atmospheric sound, but don't let that fool you; this record rocks hard. The album is an original take on rock music that the group executes incredibly well.

**Queens of the Stone Age**'s lineup has changed quite a bit since their inception, their previous drummer **Joey Castillo** even departing during the recording of *...Like Clockwork*. The current lineup consists of frontman **Joshua Homme** (lead vocals, guitar), **Troy Van Leeuwen** (guitar, backing vocals), **Dean Fertita** (keyboards, guitar, backing vocals), and **Michael Shuman** (bass, backing vocals). Largely produced by the band themselves, the album also featured many additional musicians, such as Castillo and **Dave Grohl** (of Nirvana and Foo Fighters) on drums. Also on drums is **Jon Theodore**, who joined the band after the release of the album, and performed it live alongside them.



*From left to right: Fertita, Theodore, Homme, Leeuwen, Shuman*

Each of *...Like Clockwork*'s tracks add a new and unique element to the album as a whole. While several of the tracks are of the band's many hard rock masterpieces, surging with a gritty power evocative of a ride through an arid desert, some of the greatest highlights of the record are the softer, atmospheric rock ballads. The pounding drums and riffing guitars instead make way for soft piano and emotionally-delivered lyrics. These songs prove that QOTSA does not need to be loud to be powerful. With the addition of more "avant-garde" techniques sprinkled throughout, this album is built to be a bastion of modern rock.





*More art by Boneface, made for the album's music videos*

### **Some of the Tracks:**

#### **#1 - “Keep Your Eyes Peeled” - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7kzKfwwDFRc>**

The opening track for *...Like Clockwork* perfectly encapsulates the tone that the band sought to capture with this album. Ambient sounds of crashes and breaking glass emerge from silence, and a rising rumble breaks into an ominous bassline, played by Shuman, marking the true beginning of both the song and album. Homme's vocals, assisted by a lone piano line, is evocative of one lost in a dangerous haze. Poetic lyrics seem to highlight this, with powerful imagery such as “*Fallen leaves realize they are no friend of autumn/The view from Hell is blue sky*”. As all this takes place, the drums, played by Castillo, strike loudly upon the listener's ears, heavy fills assisted by a group of distorted guitars.

The song slowly builds to a peak of multiple distorted vocal tracks and quick shots played on all the instruments, keeping it busy even while the singing rages on. And with a shout, it falls back down into the threatening gait it began with, fading softly into the next track.

#### **#2 - “I Sat by the Ocean” - (LIVE): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NWIQ-7nNYNw>**

One of the two singles released for the album, “I Sat by the Ocean” walks along at a moderate pace, although faster than the first track. This time, the melody is high paced and upbeat, accompanied at all times by a pair of riffing guitars and a melodic bass line. Underneath it all, Castillo's deceptively simple drumbeat perfectly accents the melodies as the song rises and falls through verses and choruses. Homme's voice croons over the rest of the song with bits of strong falsetto, a different direction from normal rock singers and something that may surprise new listeners of the band. The soaring vocals and flexible guitar lines are tied together by the drums, showcasing just how tight this band can be.

#### **#3 - “The Vampyre of Time and Memory” - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AEIVIYegHx8>**

The moody synths that wash over the start of this track are swiftly replaced by the sparse notes of a soft piano, making it clear that this song will be quite different from the ones before it. This track is quite somber, with Homme quietly pondering an empty life in the aftermath of his surgery (*I'm alive - hooray!/You're wrong again, 'cause I feel no love*), accompanied by only the piano.

After a while, the rest of the band joins in, giving this simple song a slight push. Although buzzing synths aim to maintain the sombreness of the song, the piano is buried by the guitars, something I consider to be a drawback for the song. Despite this, the quick drums and dry guitars succeed in finishing the song stately and powerful, yet still dramatically ponderous.

**#5 - “My God is the Sun” - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iFca32\\_7YUU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iFca32_7YUU)**

This explosive track was actually the first single released by the band. A personal favourite of mine, “My God is the Sun” is one of the highest points of the album.

The song opens with a barrage of sounds; a multitude of maracas quickly set the tempo as the guitars and bass play a energetic and catchy, yet surprisingly dark riff. Next is the drums, entering with heavy fills on the cymbals and bass drum. This fantastic intro seems to shout right in your face, announcing the driving rock that the rest of the song will be.

Once the song has faded into a simple pulsating bass line and drums, in come the vocals. Homme’s lone voice fits right into this song, full vocals pushing at the speed of the song and driving it forward. Combined with the anthem-ous chorus, “*Heal them, like fire from a gun/Kneeling, my god is the sun*”, simple driving rhythms work to keep this song stuck in your head- and you’ll love it.

After a short guitar solo and interlude which showcases Homme’s unique “desert” sound on his lead guitar, the song slows dramatically, reintroducing the chorus’ battle cry as all the band members dance around Homme’s melody on their respective instruments. After a pause, all the band members rush back in with the song’s main riff, ending the track as loudly and suddenly as it begun.

**#7 - “Fairweather Friends” - (LIVE): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bBnp2OMYE2k>**

Fittingly backed by the vocals of some of QOTSA’s friends in the music industry (including Elton John ), this song starts rather calmly, before breaking into the band’s regular rock groove. Homme’s quiet voice is joined at times by a chorus of bandmates, and sharp interjections of guitar licks and violent drums takes this track beyond that of a standard rock song. When the chorus comes around, the pounding drums beat in time with the rest of the ensemble, keeping the song sufficiently coherent, before breaking into another of Homme’s dirty guitar solos. This song particularly showcases how well Homme’s smooth vocals can fit into the rest of the song, no matter how “messy” the instrumentals become.

Once again, Homme’s medical troubles are referenced in the lyrics, “*I turned around and found that you’d gone before the first rain could fall/It seems every single time I was bleeding*”, referring to those who, unlike those featured in this song, wouldn’t stand by him in his darkest times.

**#8 - “Smooth Sailing” - (LIVE): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TKNK9iqxpI>**

To put it simply: I love this song. Although it’s my favourite off the record and probably one of my all time favourite songs in general, “Smooth Sailing” is definitely not for everyone. From the start, dissonant guitar chords and a wonky, drunken bassline make it clear that this song is not cut from the same cloth as some of the other tracks. It seems to be more in the image of QOTSA’s preceding album *Era Vulgaris*, which featured sounds described by Homme as “dark, hard, and electrical”.

Homme’s vocals are notable in this song, attitude dripping from his voice as he jumps from a light falsetto to a lower, gritty growl. Like his voice, the instruments are all of the place. While multiple guitars play around the melody, a pulsating synths and excited bass line are also thrown into the fray. One thing this track does lack, however, is a strong rhythm section, in the place of Grohl’s bombastic drumming is instead a simple rock beat and handclaps.

The amazing chaos clears during the bridge, a great resolution made up of a shout section where all the guitars finally play together. This is all quickly thrown out in the climax of the track. A fitting end to this odd song, Homme howls over overlapped guitar riffs that do not sound like they should go together, and finally a whispered “*pow*” abruptly ends the track.

**#10 - “...Like Clockwork” - (LIVE): [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RilMu\\_tfGws](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RilMu_tfGws)**



Both the final song on the album and the title track, “...Like Clockwork” is a fitting end to the record, encapsulating all the layers of somberness and energetic rock that so many of the songs before it carried. Despite sharing the soft piano and light vocals of “Vampyre”, this track carries a very different tone: dark understanding and resignation in the place of confusion (*One thing that is clear/It's all downhill from here*).

Although the end of the song (and thus the album) is graced with grand instrumentals- wide, space-y piano and synths underlined by a deep bass- the song carries to the end a more ominous undercurrent; one of shadow and surrender. Perfect.



*Photoshoot for the “Vampyre” music video*

*...Like Clockwork*'s tracks were all produced by the band themselves, with the help of recording engineer **Mark Rankin**. All of the songs are masterfully mixed, working to bring out the best characteristics of the instrumentals. Clear, soft, and gritty, the production is what truly brings out the textures of the album that set this QOTSA apart from the rest.

The album was the first of the band's to reach #1 on the Billboard 200, where it debuted and sold over 91,000 copies within the first week. It was nominated for three Grammys: “Best Rock Album”, “Best Engineered Album, Non-Classical”, and “Best Rock Performance” (For “My God is the Sun”). *...Like Clockwork*'s sound heavily influenced the band's next album, *Villains* (2017), proving the former to be a milestone in the band's discography.

The release of the album was spearheaded by a number of music videos: animated videos made by artist **Boneface**, who also created the album cover. Featuring the songs “I Appear Missing” (track 9), “Kalopsia” (6), “If I Had a Tail” (4), “Keep Your Eyes Peeled” (1), and “My God is the Sun” (5), each video was later combined into one 15 minute short, in the above order. The music videos' use of the unsettling and sometimes gruesome animation perfectly mixes with the dark themes in the music. Regular music videos were also made for “The Vampyre of Time and Memories” (3) and “Smooth Sailing” (6).

The execution of QOTSA's *...Like Clockwork* is nearly flawless, with everything from the content of the songs themselves to the post-production and advertising music videos perfectly hitting the sweet spot that Homme has in mind for the record's creation. The problems I had with the music are minuscule when compared to how amazing every other aspect was. The skillful performances, lyrics, and composition highlight what I think to be QOTSA's greatest album. To answer track 3's question of “Does anyone ever get this right?": Yeah; you do, Josh Homme.

*QOTSA at the Grammys, 2014*



**Rating: 9.8/10 - Because nobody's perfect.**